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A DISCOURSE

PREPARATORY

TO THE
RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Of the DAY of

Publick Fasting *and* Humiliation,

Appointed by

AUTHORITY,

To be kept

On FRIDAY the Sixth of FEBRUARY
1756,

On the Occasion of the late EARTHQUAKES
Abroad, and particularly at LISBON.

By HENRY STEBBING, D. D.

Chaplain in Ordinary to His Majesty.

The FOURTH EDITION, Corrected.

L O N D O N:

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M. DCC. LVII.

To the INHABITANTS of the Parish
of —————

Neighbours and Friends,

*AS I am at this Time absent from you,
and therefore not able to give you
from the Pulpit, the proper Instructions
on the approaching Fast: I take this
Method of conveying them to you.*

*In a lesser Matter, I might, perhaps,
have pleaded my Age in excuse. But
when God has spoken to us in Anger,
from the very Bowels of the Earth, and
from the Depth of the Sea; I could not
satisfy myself, without taking a Part
suitable to my Station in the Church,
in that CALL to a national Repentance,
to which such Dispensations of Provi-
dence naturally direct, and which is
specially incumbent upon all Orders of
the Clergy.*

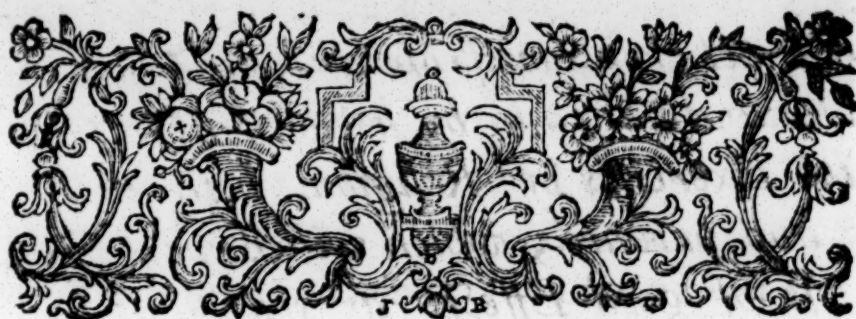
The Day, I hope, you will observe, by a strict Cessation from all your worldly Occupations, and by a close Attention to the Exercises of Religion, both publick and private; which will have more or less of good Effect, as you shall be more or less prepared. To assist you in this, is the Intention of the Discourse I now present to you; which I hope you will accept with Candour, and read with Profit. And that the Grace of God may attend you in all your pious Endeavours, is the earnest Prayer of,

Your faithful Minister,

And Servant in Christ Jesus,

*London,
Jan. 5, 1756.*

HENRY STEBBING.



LUKE. xiii. 3, 5.

— *Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish.*



THE Context informs us, that *there were some who told our Saviour of the Galileans whose Blood Pilate had mingled with their Sacrifices; that is whom Pilate slew whilst they were offering their Sacrifices. To which our Saviour answers, Suppose ye that these Galileans were Sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such Things? I tell you Nay; but except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish. To strengthen this Observation he adds another Example — Or those eighteen upon whom the Tower in Siloam*

Siloam fell and slew them; think ye that they were Sinners above all Men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you Nay; but except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish.

It is very natural to conjecture, by the Turn of this Answer, that those who told our Saviour this Story of the *Galileans*, did it not without some Censure upon the Sufferers, as more obnoxious to God's Justice than other Men. Mankind even at this Day is very apt to do the same Thing upon like Occasions. Let us take the Thing in this Light, and see what our Saviour's Answer amounts to: *I tell you Nay*—what is it he here denies? Why not that these *Galileans* were Sinners, nor yet that this Destruction was the Judgment of God upon them for their Sins. But he denies that their suffering such Things was a sufficient Ground whereupon to conclude, that they were *greater* Sinners than the Rest of the *Galileans* who did *not* suffer them. So again, with Respect to those eighteen upon whom the Tower of *Siloam* fell and slew them, he does not deny that they were Sinners, nor that they were thus overwhelmed *because* they were Sinners; he only says that this was no Evidence that they were *greater*

greater Sinners, than the other Inhabitants of *Jerusalem* were. So that nothing can be raised upon these Words in *Disparagement* of the common Belief, which has prevailed in all Places and in all Ages, *viz.* That God, in the ordinary Course of his Providence, does interpose to punish wicked Men or wicked Nations in this World. But what follows in the Text most evidently supports this Notion; *except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish*; which is as plain a Declaration of a vindictive Providence presiding over Men as is possible. To say that *except ye repent ye shall perish*; is in other Words to say, that God will punish for Sin; and it was a Call upon the *Jews* to make Use of the Examples that were before their Eyes, as a Warning to themselves, who were not *therefore* the less Sinners, because God had hitherto spared them, but would certainly be the greater Sufferers if they accepted not the Grace offered by him, and turned not unto God by true Repentance. And this was afterwards verified upon them in a remarkable Manner. For as *Pilate* mingled the Blood of these *Galileans* with their Sacrifices, and those Eighteen were slain by the Fall of the Tower in *Siloam*; so it happened to *them*, from the *Romans*,

mans, who enclosed their City, and upon the very Day appointed for killing their Passover, slew many of them in the very Temple, whilst others were crushed in Pieces by the Ruins of the Towers of the City.

It has ever been the Case that God has been more gracious in giving Warning than Man has been wise in taking it. The old World wanted not Warning of the approaching Deluge; but they regarded it not. They were Eating and Drinking, Marrying, and giving in Marriage, till the Day that Noah entered in to the Ark; and knew not (i. e. considered not) until the Flood came and took them all away, Matt. xxiv. 38, 39. So it was with the Jews: Their Captivities were foretold by their Prophets, and their final Destruction by our Blessed Saviour; yet they repented not. God doth not in these Days send his Prophets to warn us; but he warns us by his Word and the Works of his Providence, when he makes the Examples of Wickedness, the Examples also of his Justice. Happy for us when such Examples have their due Effect in calling us back to ourselves, when we have deviated from the Paths of Virtue. But let us take Heed of passing rash Judgment

Judgment upon the Sufferers in *Consequence* of such Events; or of singling out of Peoples Characters what we do not like, and saying; *This is the Sin* for which they are punished. This is not our Business; nor did our Saviour make it any Part of his; but, without so much as saying whether the *Galileans* were or were not Sinners, or of what *Nature* or *Kind* their Sins were, immediately calls the *Jews* to the Judgment of themselves. If I know a Man to be a Sinner, I *must* judge him to be a Sinner: But this Judgment arises not as a *Consequence* from what he suffers, but from its own proper Evidence, which would have been the same whether he had suffered or not. And if when I see the Sin, I likewise see *Mischief* following close at the Heels of it; I both *may* and *should* take Judgment to myself, *so far* as to make the Example a Matter of *Caution*; that is to say, I may judge or believe, that *possibly* or *probably*, the *Mischief* was sent as a Punishment for the Sin; because it agrees with God's general Method of dealing with Sinners, as declared in his holy Word. Those who will not suffer us to go thus far without taking Offence (if such there are)

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may *pretend* Tenderness; but the Offence *really* springs from *Unbelief*. If we are to raise *any* Conclusion from such Examples, we cannot say *less* than this; and if we are to raise *none*, they are offered to us in vain. But the Scripture *directs* us to take Notice of these Things as Warnings to Repentance; and if we would make this good Use of all the Sin and Mischief that we see in the World, and avoid Sin for *fear* of its Consequences, we should act a very wise Part, and answer the End which Providence intended by such Examples.

BUT there is something deeply rooted in human Nature which defeats these Measures of Providence. We care neither to part with our Vices, nor to see the Rod of God hanging over our Heads. We would, if we could, sin on and be safe too. This puts us upon Tricks, and Contrivances, to destroy this troublesome Conjunction of Sin with Misery; which was *Epicurus's* Master-Piece. But this Man did not do his Work. He *cut* the Knot which he could not *untie*. He could not shew, that, supposing a wise and righteous Governor of the World, there
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can be any Safety for Sinners. If he had done this he had been a Master indeed ! But instead of this he absolutely *discards* a Providence ; and, as he had made (or *fancied* he had made) a World without God, so he left it to go on without him too. There are some such Philosophers in these Times ; and there are *Prejudices* which will minister a Handle to those who are disposed to take it.

IN the first Place, they will tell you, that this (supposed) Providence of God in punishing Sinners in this World is not *equal*. Bad Men perish ; and so do good Ones too, by the very same Method : By War, by Famine, by Pestilence, and the like. And does not our Saviour tell you as much ? He tells you, that the *Galileans*, whose Blood *Pilate* mingled with their Sacrifices, were not greater Sinners than other *Galileans* who ~~not~~ not with the same Fate. He tells you, that they upon whom the Tower of *Siloam* fell, and slew them, were not Sinners above those who escaped. This is disclaiming an equal Providence. For how else were it consistent, that those who were

equally, and, perhaps, more guilty, should not have been alike involved in the same, or in greater Ruin? This notwithstanding he both gives and repeats his Advice; *Repent, or, ye shall all likewise perish.* The Truth is, that an equal Providence enters not at all into the Notion of a vindictive Providence. No-body maintains that under an ordinary Providence God distributes equal Justice in this World: Nor is this any Impeachment of the Justice of Providence; because we believe that God *hath appointed a Day in which he will judge the World in Righteousness*; in which every Man will receive the due Reward of his Deeds. Nevertheless, we may consistently say (and it is ALL we say) that for the present Terror of evil Doers, God may and does interpose, WHEN HE SEES MEET, to punish wicked Men and wicked Nations. So that the proper Use of the Doctrine of a vindictive Providence is, not that because we see other wicked Men punished, we ourselves shall certainly be punished, but, that because others are punished, we also (who are not less wicked) very probably may be punished; which is a Consideration that prevails

vails upon us in every other Instance in common Life. If your Neighbour's House should be on Fire, it is not *certain* that Your's will be burnt: Yet you use the proper Precautions; and you would be reckoned a mad Man if you should not. If a Master punishes a Servant for his ill Behaviour; another Servant may find Favour; but no wise Man will think himself secure, but, admonished by the Example, will take Care not to offend. It is in this very Light, in which St. Paul places this Argument in the tenth Chapter of his first Epistle to the *Corinthians*, where having recounted the several Judgments of God upon the *Israelites*, he says (*1 Cor. x. 11.*) that *these Things happened unto them for Examples, and are written for our Admonition, that we should not lust after evil Things.* And yet St. Paul cannot be supposed to have been ignorant of what common Experience and Observation shews, ~~viz.~~ That all Men have not equal Justice done them in this World, but that whilst God punisheth some, he spareth others, not less, but perhaps more, deserving Punishment.

ALL

ALL this, you will say, would be very Right, if we were *sure*, that when bad Men suffer it is the Punishment of God for their Sins. But how do we know this? Bad Men suffer; but we see not the Hand of God in their Sufferings. The *Galileans* were slain; but they were slain by *Pilate*. The *Eighteen* were overwhelmed by the Fall of the Tower of *Siloam*. It was old and crazy (you will say) and happened (*unluckily*) to fall just at that Time, as we see in many Instances. By what Circumstance then, by what Connexion, will you shew that God was *more* concerned in these than in all *other* common Events? Truly I know not, nor are you or I at all concerned to know it. If our Saviour were now among us, and should be told of a House falling down, somewhere in *London*, and killing many, I presume he would give the same Answer. And should he be farther asked, how he knew that the Hand of God was more concerned in this than in any other ordinary Event; he would tell such Enquirers, as he has told us, that ALL Events, ordinary or extraordinary, are in the Hand of God. Not a Sparrow shall fall on the Ground
without

without your Father; yea, the very Hairs of your Head are all numbered by him, Matt. x. 29, 30. Nor was this the Doctrine of Christ only; it was the Faith of all the ancient People of God. Hear the elegant Description of it by the Royal Psalmist, which I will give you in the Translation that is most familiar to you. HE covereth the Heaven with Clouds and prepareth Rain for the Earth, and maketh the Grass to grow upon the Mountains, and Herb for the Use of Men. HE giveth Fodder unto the Cattle, and feedeth the young Ravens that call upon him.—HE giveth Snow like Wool and scattereth the Hoar-frost like Ashes. HE casteth forth his Ice like Morsels; who is able to abide his Frosts? HE sendeth out his Word and melteth them; HE bloweth with his Wind and the Waters flow, Ps. cxlvii. Or, as it is in the Book of Job, Chap. xii. 7, &c. Ask now the Beasts and they will teach thee, and the Fowls of the Air and they will tell thee. Or speak to the Earth and it shall teach thee; and the Fishes of the Sea shall declare unto thee. What shall they teach? What shall they declare? Why the Power and Wisdom of God continually interposing to govern the World. For so it follows—IN WHOSE HAND is the
Soul

Soul of every living Thing, and the Breath of all Mankind—*With HIM is Wisdom and Strength—HE breaketh down, and it cannot be built again — He withholdeth the Waters and they dry up; also he sendeth them out, and they overturn the Earth — He taketh away the Heart of the Chief of the People of the Earth; and causeth them to wander in a Wilderness where there is no Way. They grope in the Dark without Light, and he maketh them to stagger like a drunken Man.* Have we not seen or heard of any Thing like this! — Lay then this down as a sure Principle (and sure it is) that God is in every Thing we see, in every Thing we enjoy, and in every Thing we suffer; and you will have a ready Answer to all the Cavils, which vain Philosophy offers to thrust God out of the World. Let them *talk* of their natural Causes till they are tired (and soon they will be tired if they have Sense) it helps them not, so long as natural Causes themselves are under the Direction of Providence. But the very Moment you set up, or give into a System of Causes and Effects, which *separate* God from his Works, you destroy every Effect which the Consideration of what we see
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about us should have, in reforming our Lives, and slide into the Folly or Madness of *Atheism* — and to *Atheists* I have nothing to say.

I TAKE it for granted, that your own Thoughts have already prevented me in applying this Subject to that great Calamity which has lately befallen the City of LISBON, and which has been felt (with more or less Severity) in many other Parts of the World. It is a Subject highly deserving our most serious Consideration, and upon which it will become us to think, and to speak, with good Sense, and with Piety? Are you asked, whether this *is* the Work of God? you may answer boldly it *is* his Work; as much as is the Rising and Setting of the Sun; as much as it is his Work that we have Clouds and Rain; that the Seasons are kindly or unkindly; that the Weather is serene or tempestuous, and the like. Would you know whether this was *meant* as a Punishment for their Sins? You may answer, that we can determine nothing with Certainty of the *precise* Intentions of Providence in this Case, who hath other Reasons of sending Evil

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upon Man besides the Punishment of Sin. But (for the Reason before given) you may say, with great *Probability*, that these Men were punished for their Sins (especially if their Sins were great and crying) which I conceive our Saviour's Words will justify. But you are not to argue from their Calamities *what* or *how great* their Sins were; nor presume to determine whether if their Sins had been *less*, this Distress would or would not have happened. This is venturing too far into the Secrets of Providence, and the very Mistake which our Saviour reprehends. Suppose ye that these Galileans were Sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such Things! I tell you Nay; but except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish. Turn therefore your Thoughts back upon yourselves; and act in the same Manner, as you would have thought it reasonable to act, if you had seen the *naked* Arm of God scattering Death and Ruin over the Heads of these sinful People. If you would have repented *then* do it *now*. This hurts no-body, and may be the Means of saving you from Destruction.

It

It hath pleased the Wisdom of our Superiors to appoint a solemn Day of Fasting and Humiliation upon this melancholy Event; and, as it may be of the greatest Consequence to us, that the Day be observed in a Manner acceptable to Almighty God, I hope it will not be thought improper, if I say something that may be useful in the Way of Preparation.

Days of Fasting (we know) in common with all other Acts of outward Worship, receive all their real Worth from the Mind or Spirit that accompanies them. Outward Form and Solemnity should be observed; but yet as a Help to raise those inward Sentiments, both in ourselves and others, which becomes those who are offering themselves as Supplicants to the Throne of Heaven. And as this Event is the greatest Call in its Kind which has been known in the Memory of any Person living, or (I think) recorded in History? I should hope the Solemnity will be proportionable. Earthquakes are common Things, and I have hitherto treated *these* no otherwise than as

common Events ; but, in the *Circumstances* of them, they have the Appearance of something more than common ; and it is scarce possible to read the Accounts we have had from Abroad, without recollecting our Saviour's Prophecy, as it is recorded, *Luke xxi.* when, with the Destruction of *Jerusalem*, he points also at his second Coming to Judgment. *Nation shall rise up against Nation, and Kingdom against Kingdom, and great Earthquakes shall be in divers Places, and Famines, and Pestilences — There shall be Distress of Nations with Perplexity, the Seas and the Waves roaring. Mens Hearts failing them for Fear; and for looking after those Things which are coming on the Earth; for the Powers of Heaven shall be shaken,* I do not think that we have Light enough in these Matters to pin down this Prophecy to these Events ; nor to determine how near or how far off Christ's second Coming may be. There seem to be other Prophecies not yet accomplished, which must be accomplished before this comes to pass. But, as the *Resemblance* between what we now see, and what shall be seen, when the last Catastrophe comes, naturally connects

nects them together in our Thoughts; so it will always be our Wisdom, when we see such Signs as these, *so far* to be apprehensive that *the End of all Things is at Hand*, as to *be sober and watch unto Prayer*, 1 Pet. iv. 7. Christ's coming may *not* be near. But of one Thing we are certain, *viz.* that every Man's Life is short; and when Death comes, *that is to him* (to all Intents and Purposes) the Time of Christ's coming. Therefore since the Voices of God and Man call us, let us gird on our Sackcloth. Let the GREAT Ones of the Earth lead the Train, and behave as those who have a *Master in Heaven*, not as if they thought Religion to be a Thing fit only for the Vulgar. *Let the Elders assemble, let the Congregation be gathered together, even to the Children that suck the Breasts. Let the Priests, the Ministers of the Lord weep between the Porch and the Altar, and let them say, spare thy People, O Lord!* * But with the *Shadow* there should be *Substance*; with the *Appearance* there should be *Truth*; otherwise, instead of atoning for our Sins, we shall make them so much the more provoking. So said God to his People by the Mouth

* Joel ii. 16.

of

of the Prophet *Isaiah*, in that fine Passage, well known, but, which cannot too often be repeated or considered.

THE Prophet begins his Prophecy with a heavy Complaint against the *Jews*, for the consummate Profligateness of their Manners, under all the outward Pomp and Formality of Religion. You will find a Sample of their Vices towards the Close of the first Chapter. *How is the faithful City become an Harlot! It was full of Judgment, Righteousness lodged in it, but now Murderers—Thy Princes (i. e. thy chief Men) are rebellious and Companions of Thieves. Every one loveth Gifts and followeth after Rewards. They judge not the Fatherless; neither doth the Cause of the Widow come unto them, ver. 21—24. And upon this View of the Case, he says (ver. 9.) Except the Lord of Hosts had left unto us a very small Remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah; that is, God would have destroyed us as he did Sodom and Gomorrah. In the very next Verse he addresses himself to the ruling Men among the *Jews*.—Hear the Word of the Lord ye Rulers of Sodom, and give Ear to the*

the Law of our God ye People of Gomorrah. To what Purpose is the Multitude of your Sacrifices to me? saith the Lord. I am full of the Burnt-Offerings of Rams, and the Fat of fed Beasts. — Bring no more vain Oblations; Incense is an Abomination to me; the new Moons, and the Sabbaths, and the Calling of Assemblies I cannot away with: It is Iniquity even your solemn Meetings. The new Moons and your appointed Feasts my Soul hateth; they are a Trouble unto me, I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your Hands I will hide mine Eyes from you; yea, when ye make many Prayers I will not hear you: Your Hands are full of Blood. Wash ye make ye clean, put away the Evil of your Doings from before mine Eyes, cease to do Evil, learn to do well, seek Judgment, relieve the Oppressed, judge the Fatherless, plead for the Widow, Isaiah i. 10—18. You see here that the whole Force, Virtue, and Efficacy of religious Observances, lies in their Connexion with true Repentance; that is, the entire and thorough Change and Reformation of the Heart. This is a great Work; not to be done all at once, especially when Men have been long habituated to Sin.

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There must be a Beginning *here* as there is in every other Work. And if the Beginning be as it should be, we may have comfortable Hopes, that in the Progress and Conclusion we shall not be disappointed in our Expectations.

The Beginning of Repentance must necessarily be placed in a Sense of our Sins, and in the Belief of the Power, Justice and Goodness of God; for we *can* go no lower. Because he, who never considers *who* or *what* God is; nor knows nor cares whether he is a Sinner or not, is *absolutely* impenitent. The Law of God is legible to all, and shews us our Duty. When we compare our own Lives with this Law, our own Consciences will tell us in what Instances we have offended. The Consideration of the Perfections of the divine Nature, as visible in the Works of the Creation, will teach us to fear his Wrath; and the gracious Dispensation of the Gospel will shew us upon what Terms we are to hope for Mercy. But these Things are apt to be neglected, and when they *are* neglected, it will be the same Thing as if we had neither Law nor Gospel;

Gospel ; nor Hope or Fear of any Thing hereafter to come. It is the Intention of Providence, by such Examples as we have now before us, to awaken our Attention to these Things, which the Cares, and the Business, and the Vanities of Life too frequently drive out of our Minds; and if such Examples *have* this Effect, and with Consciousness of our Guilt, and earnest Resolutions of Amendment, we come to God imploring his Mercy ; our Fasting will be a Service acceptable to him. We shall have done as much as our *present* Conditions will admit. But we are not to suppose that our Work is finished when the Day is over. The greater Part is yet to come ; which is to keep alive those Sparks of Religion which such Occasions have kindled in our Hearts, till they grow up into a shining Light, and not suffer them to languish and die upon our Minds. So that, both *before* and *after*, here is a proper and necessary Employment for us. *Before*, to prepare the Ground to receive the good Seed; and *afterwards* to enable the Seed sown to bring forth the Fruits of Holiness.

Natural Sense will suggest to every Man, that the Way to carry on a Reformation with Success is to cut off the Occasions of Sin, and to place ourselves at a proper Distance from every Thing that is apt to divert the Attention from the *one Thing necessary*; and there is no Doubt, a wide Difference between that Spirit which ought to accompany our *Devotions*, and that which we bring with us from the *Playhouse* or the *Card-Table*. Does not this suggest some *Suspension* at least? Should there not be some *Pause*; some *Truce* with our Pleasures? Yes; and, if we mean only the Religion of a *Day*, possibly this may do. But if we intend a *general* Reformation of Manners (and nothing less will effectually serve) we must go a great deal farther, and consider of some general Regulation of the common Diversions; which, instead of being used as such, are, with many, the main Business of Life. This is Liberty *abused*; and it is the great Engine that has *poured out upon us the Spirit of Slumber*, and given us *Eyes that we should not see, and Ears that we should not hear*.

bear *. The ill Effects of these Things, have been so sensibly felt, that, in some Instances, the Law has interposed; but to little better Purpose than to shew its own Weakness †. What then is to be done. — Let us be wise, and do that for ourselves, which Laws cannot do for us; and let us make *haste* to do it; for who can tell how long God will spare us? Have we not seen the whole Earth around us trembling from its very Foundations? Have we not felt the more distant Effects of it, even within ourselves? And who is that Explorer of natural Causes? Who that Searcher into the secret Purposes of God, that can assure us, that Destruction will not overtake us in a Moment? What did the Inhabitants of *Lisbon* know of their being to be destroyed by an Earthquake, before the Moment, when they felt the Ground heaving under their Feet; their Houses falling; and the Walls that

* Isaiah xxix. 10.

Rom. xi. 8.

† I will instance particularly in *Playhouses*, which, though limited by a late Act of Parliament, are as frequent throughout the Kingdom as if no such Act had been made; to the great Prejudice of private Families in calling off Servants from their Business; and of the Publick in general, by encouraging Idleness and Debauchery.

had

had been the Witneſſes of their Luxuries and Debaucheries, prepared, inſtantly, to become their living Graves? No more than the Cities of *Sodom* and *Gomorrhah* knew of their being deſtroyed by Fire and Brimſtone from Heaven. But theſe (in ſome Sort) may be excuſed; for they had no Warning. Not ſo, the Inhabitants of the *old World*, for they had Warning by the preaching of *Noah*, but repented not. And have not we had Warning? Yes; the greateſt we can aſk, unleſs we expect (what we have no Right to expect) that God ſhould work Miracles to ſave us.

To ſtand out then againſt this Warning, is, in Effect, to ſay, that we will take *no* Warning till our Deſtruction comes; and then *all* Warnings will be at an End. God alone knows the Events of Things, and what he has to do with us. But, if we remain a People to ſolemnize the wiſhed for Day; I hope we ſhall not forget, with our Humiliations, to offer up our Thankſgivings to God; that amidſt theſe Convulſions of Nature; whilſt Cities have been deſtroyed, and many Thouſands buried in Ruins; we
have

have been left alive and untouched, to prostrate ourselves before his Footstool, and implore his Mercy. If we thus *fast unto God*, he will accept our Prayers, and we may have comfortable Hopes that he will yet spare us. But if our Fast is to begin without Thought, and to end without Reformation; let us take Heed, that instead of averting God's Wrath, we *bring not upon ourselves SWIFTER Destruction.*

F I N I S.



